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# Centaur's Podbrey looks for the 'bells, buzzers . . .'

## Theatres

by Kati Vita

I liked David Fennario's play On The Job so much that last week I borrowed a script from Centaur and brought it home to reread. When I finally settled in with a mugful of coffee and opened it, I was in for a rude shock.

This wasn't Pinter's ambiguous small talk, nor the robust cadences of the waterfront recreated in the crucible of Miller's intellect. The text was unintelligible and near illiterate. Where was the play that had moved me to tears?

Obviously the man to answer my question was the Centaur's artistic director since its inception seven years ago. Maurice Podbrey, the Great White Talent Scout had discovered Fennario in the wilds of Pointe St. Charles.

How on earth could he have seen that there was a play in that script?

Podbrey contemplated the smoke curling from a cigarette. "You can tell within the first five pages," he answered dreamily. "The rhythm was there. I could sense the conflict, I could see life unfolding. His imagination was expressing itself dramatically.

"But," he interrupted himself, "that's all rationalization afterwards. The first reaction is: Ah! here is a playwright!"

Flashing lights and bells ringing?

### Buzzers

"Yes," he responds eagerly, taking hold of the simile. "Bells and buzzers and balloons. It's instinctive I suppose. You just say: It's there, he's got it, it's a play."

Has his instinct ever let him down in his quest to find the Great Canadian Playwright?

"You mean have I backed the wrong people? No. But not every road leads to a play. I talk to so many people about projects. To writers who interest me, I say: Take it. Go away and come back if something clicks; talk to me again.

### Reeled in

"What made me tip Fennario? Well, I came to Canada with big ideas. This is a big country, it must have something to say: An indigenuous voice. And I waited for the voices. After a while I realized that I wasn't hearing anything, that if I wanted Canadian plays I had to go out and find the writers. Commission those people I had faith in. Sure, there were other Canadian plays around — and we used some of them — but Centaur had to develop its own writers. Anything beyond that would be gravy."

How do you go about finding Canadian writers?

"Well, we cast our bread upon the waters, as it were," he chuckles at the double-entendre, "and every so often someone swallows it and we reel him in. Sometimes of course it's just a sequence of coincidences.

"I heard Jamie Portman talking on radio one Sunday morning about Joanna Glass and a book of hers as being the great underrated book of the century — and he mentioned that she'd written two excellent one act plays, Canadian Gothic and American Modern, so I started to search for them.

"Eventually I found them in the States and just as I'd hoped, they were two lovely plays. We put them on and they were smash hits here."

My mind wanders back to one of my first meetings with Maurice Podbrey. A strong gust of wind had blown him around the corner of Craig Street. His face was wreathed in an authentic Cheshire cat smile. Canary? Heck, no: He had just swallowed the entire board of Instant Theatre and "Guess what?" he said, "we are going to open a real live theatre in the Old Stock Exchange."

Now, seven years later, we recall that meeting and cluck companionably. Podbrey had said then that Montreal was a director's dream. Practically nothing had ever been done here, so he could pick and choose from anything anyone had ever written. The sky was the limit.

### Irresponsible

"Nonono," Podbrey reacts. "That was a bit naive. Sure, the whole world is my oyster as far as repertoire is concerned, but the plays I want to do now, this year, that's very limited by what I consider to be propitious, important, relevant. You're completely free only if you are irresponsible. If you're responsible, you cannot be free."

He is fully awake now. "Another thing I said to you at the time was that I wanted theatre to be as exciting as a hockey game."

I had found the analogy barbaric at the time.

"Well," he continues: "We had a student audience from Verdun for On The Job and when the boss got his comeuppance, right at that moment a cheer went up from the kids with a sound that I haven't heard outside the Forum. Ever. So I just keep my nose in the air and play my hunches.

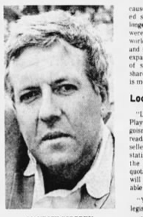
"I've been talking to Rick Salutin. I want him to write us a play about Les Canadiens, the Montreal hockey team. I think we'd get a lot of political and social observation. An irreverent look." He has asked Ken Dryden to collaborate.

### Identity

There is no real shortage of new plays though, is there? Just what is this search for The Great Canadian Playwright achieving?

Podbrey smiles benignly. "Provided the play is good of course, it raises the temperature of the event enormously when people recognize themselves. It's a surge of excitement that sometimes will raise a play far beyond its own merit."

I don't buy that thesis. Robert Anderson wrote a play called Shock of Recognition. The point was recognizing oneself in other people. The setting doesn't matter: We recognize the milieu, not the geographical location.



MAURICE PODBREY
. . . had to find writers

"You're leaving out the emotional response factor," Podbrey argues. "I remember someone telling me once that they had read one of Mordechai Richler's early novels in which he talks about waiting for a date in the lobby of the Snowdon Cinema and watching the tropical fishes swimming around in the aquarium there. It established an immediate bond because the lobby has been redecorated since and the aquarium is no longer there and he felt that they were the only two people left in the world who shared that knowledge, and somehow that shared experience expanded to include the assumption of shared identity, shared values, shared sorrows, everything. So locale is more important than you think.

### Local plays

"Looking for the Great Canadian Playwright is not chauvinism or jingoism. Books Canada is now full of readable books, some of them best sellers, not just Queen's Printer's statistics. Everyone screamed when the CRTC brought in a Canadian quota on radio, but Juan Rodriguez will tell you, suddenly we have a viable recording industry."

"You really think it's possible to legislate culture?" I ask, dubiously.

"You can't foist things down people's throats ad infinitum", he answers. "If you could, we'd all be bilingual and bicultural by now. Sure, the MSO still hands out its yearly bundle to commission Canadian works, and they still schedule them before the first intermission so that concert patrons don't actually have to sit through them.

"I guess it all comes back to this vexed question of identity. If our playwrights come up with something we can recognize, maybe we'll stop having to define ourselves in terms of what we're not."

# Léveillée at peak of style

By JUAN RODRIGUEZ
for The Gazette

It is a measure of Claude Léveillée's talent that, although he's carried on a tradition of romantic poetic music, he has not become redundent. It is not only his consummate style, but also the very strength of his music that keeps him going after nearly twenty years.

That is why perhaps it should be no surprise that his latest show, which runs at Theatre Maisonneuve until Sunday, represents the apex of his career.

Only Léveillée would be able to improve upon an apparently smooth pat style.

The years of composing for Edith Piaf, the years of theatre and the years giving thousands of shows around the world — all have resulted in a music with the kind of strong fibre that endures on its merits (instead of sentimentality, with which so much similar romantic fare is imbued.)

His new show is somewhat of a scrapbook of his life and times, with slides and special lighting effects heightening the atmosphere. Dressed in his familiar black velvet suit, he whispers and cracks his voice with poetic reminiscences, and renders his songs with an effortlessly rhythmic ballad style.

His piano has never sounded better (the microphone positioning and the entire sound system is particularly clear in this show), his is a crystalline single-note style, part classical, part jazz, and pure Léveillée.

Backed by a six-man group under the direction of Michel Lefrancois — with the bonus of percussionist Gilles Shetagne from Maneige — Léveillée's sound is more subtle than ever, a mesh of carefully played instruments making not clamor but human vibrations.

Nathalie Naubert, left, Jean Coutu and Angele Coutu in Les precieuses ridicules

# Damsels draws no laugh, Emperor creates no mood

By KATI VITA
for The Gazette

The TNM is presenting, until Feb. 21, two early plays by men skirting middle age.

Molire was 37 when he wrote Les Précieuses Ridicules; Eugene O'Neill was 32 when The Emperor Jones first appeared.

Both drew on prior experiences. O'Neill directly, incorporating the lush fauna he had grown to hate on a trip to Honduras, along with a story he had heard in a Madison Avenue bar.

The Precious Damsels — as it's known in English — was Molière's first hit, written with the perspective gained through 12 years of exile in the French provinces away from the seat of power.

They are strong meat, but last night you would not have known it.

Both plays are directed by and star Jean Coutu. Apart from Les Fourberies de Scapin before Christmas, this marks Coutu's return to the Montreal stage after two years in California.

Coutu has been 32 years in the business and it would not do to treat his artistic conception lightly. Nor do I. But try as I may, I could not raise a laugh during the Molière and Emperor Jones bored me.

The Ridicules make themselves ridiculous by ignoring human values because at all costs they want to be "in." It takes a lackey, dressed up as a silk purse, to make them realize their mistake.

As the sow's ear, Jean Coutu bypasses all avenue of self-expression, bar burlesque. The vocal acrobatics are almost a match for Peking Opera, but physical inventiveness is nil and we get nary a whiff of the subtext. It all starts in so high a gear that it has nowhere to grow but on my nerves.

Emperor Jones suffers, as do all things, in translation — literally. When Hall of Fame becomes Panthéon, it is a different reference altogether. And also in comparison with the images O'Neill painted.

Coutu's panic-stricken black never loses his heroic declamatory powers, his pent-up anger still flows mellifluously. He is neither uppity Nigra nor contemporary black man, and since his is the only speaking part for six of the eight scenes, Emperor Jones, which is essentially a mood play, never establishes a mood.

A third of the way through I began to feel that I was not in the theatre at all but sitting through Haydn's Farewell Symphony, with the audience leaving one by one, surreptitiously, during the blackouts.

Perhaps if Coutu were to go back to the texts and reread them for meaning rather than stage business . . . perhaps . . .

*Boky sings warmly*

# Fiedler, MSO tops in pops

## Music

By Jacob Siskind

Arthur Fiedler is by now something of a musical legend. He has been leading the Boston Pops Orchestra concerts for nearly half a century and his name is identified with a very special kind of musical program.

It was, therefore, something of a surprise to find him conducting one of the Montreal Symphony's Soirees d'Opéra this week — not that he can't conduct opera, it just isn't his bag.

Actually, as it turned out, his concert last night at the Salle Wilfrid Pelletier was a typical Fiedler pops concert and not a soirée d'opéra at all. Colette Boky was the guest soloist and she sang very warmly and beautifully, but even her contributions were not entirely operatic.

But it really didn't matter in the long run, because all of the people who did turn out for the concert — and there weren't all that many — had a spanking good time.

Fiedler obviously has a lot of fun conducting programs that he puts together, and his enthusiasm infects both the orchestra in front of him and the audience behind. If the applause was lukewarm, put it down to a typical Montreal reaction to anything that doesn't have sparklers or a décolleté down to there.

As a matter of fact, Boky sang far more eloquently than I have heard for a long time and the public reaction was cool. A function of her conservative dresses, no doubt!

The Montreal Symphony seemed to be in particularly good form last night. Not only was the ensemble good and the sound of the orchestra agreeable, but the individual solos of many of the players were often exceptional.

Fiedler asked the first horn to take a bow after the Mignon Overture, and he did the same for the cello solo in the Donizetti aria. There was some fine playing from the bassoon in the Chabrier Espana and there was a luscious flute solo in the Lullaby from Gayne.

But the orchestra and Fiedler really came into their own in the Vincent Youmans medley from No, No, Nanette. The orchestrations were luxuriant and the playing was really first class.

The Montreal Symphony should do more of this kind of thing. It gives the ensemble a flexibility and a freedom from its usual stuffiness that is most welcome.

As for the soloist of the evening, Colette Boky was in especially good voice and it was as much a pleasure to hear her croon through My Man's Gone Now and Vilia as to have her sing the big La Traviata first act aria.

On the whole a very, very pleasant evening, even if it had very little to do with opera.

## Baryshnikov is replaced

TORONTO — (CP) — Fernando Bujones of the American Ballet Theatre and Peter Martins of the New York City Ballet will replace Mikhail Baryshnikov during the spring season of the National Ballet of Canada, it was announced this week.

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*Globe award helps*

# Oscar lies one step closer for Lies

By DANE LANKEN
of The Gazette

The Oscar race chances of the Montreal-made film Lies My Father Told Me have been greatly bolstered by its win last week in the Golden Globes Awards, says 'Lies' producer Harry Gulkin, currently in Los Angeles.

Columbia Pictures, U.S. distributors of the movie, have embarked on an intensive if belated campaign on its behalf.

Ads placed by Columbia in Hollywood trade journals this week ask consideration for Lies in the contests for best picture, best director and best screenplay.

"The ads might be a little late," said Gulkin by telephone from L.A. "Ballots to pick the five nominees for each category went out to Academy members late last week and I imagine some have already been sent back. So the ads could have been in earlier.

"But Columbia didn't know they had a winner with Lies. It took the Golden Globes' win to let them know."

Lies won the Golden Globe Award for best foreign film over four other prestigious films — Claude Lelouch's And Now My love, Ingmar Bergman's The Magic Flute, Costa-Gavras' Special Section and the new British production of Hedda Gabler with Glenda Jackson.

The Golden Globes are presented annually by the Hollywood Foreign Press Association, and are sometimes considered a portent of things to come in the Oscar race.

Columbia had banked heavily on two films, Shampoo and Funny Lady, in the Globes race, but neither came through. Thus a lot of attention has been transferred to Lies My Father Told Me.

This new attention complements a growing reputation Lies has gathered in the movie capital.

A story in The Hollywood Reporter last week called Lies "the sleeper from Canada," and later saw the Globes win as giving Canadian film-making "worldwide clout."

Gulkin said that the win had also rekindled interest in the film in Canada, where it has re-opened in several cities.

But it is the Oscar race which seems to have attracted Gulkin's imagination, aided by Columbia's sudden interest. Is Gulkin hopeful?

"You know what the old man in the movie says," Gulkin answered. "We don't believe in miracles, but we rely on them."

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